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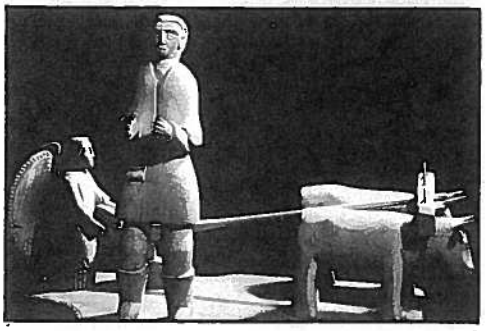

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GUSTAVE BAUMANN

A Century of Delight

By Juliet Currie

GUSTAVE BAUMANN, INGENIOUS MASTER of the color woodcut, was born one hundred years ago in Magdeburg, Germany.

Once he said, "Given a free choice in the matter, I would have selected the Southwest as the place to be born. I would then have learned Spanish, along with riding a horse and predicting the weather."

But had he not had his German heritage, he might not have developed such a reverence for fine craftsmanship, nor discovered all he could do with his gifted hands. Though he moved to Chicago at the young age of ten, his imagination was steeped in images from German folk tradition.

At sixteen, Baumann began to study at the Chicago Art Institute and to work in the world of commercial art.

By 1905, he returned to Germany for a year of study at Munich's Koenigliche Kunstgewerbeschule. It was fashionable at that time for American artists to study in Europe, but Baumann, like many of the others, did not seem to be much influenced by the then current styles of painting. His work showed none of the anguish and despair of Expressionism, none of the exotic, "decadent" themes of Art Nouveau. From the start, he depicted peaceful, familiar scenes with simplicity and directness.

All examples of Gustave Baumann's work shown are from the collections of the New Mexico Museum of Fine Arts.

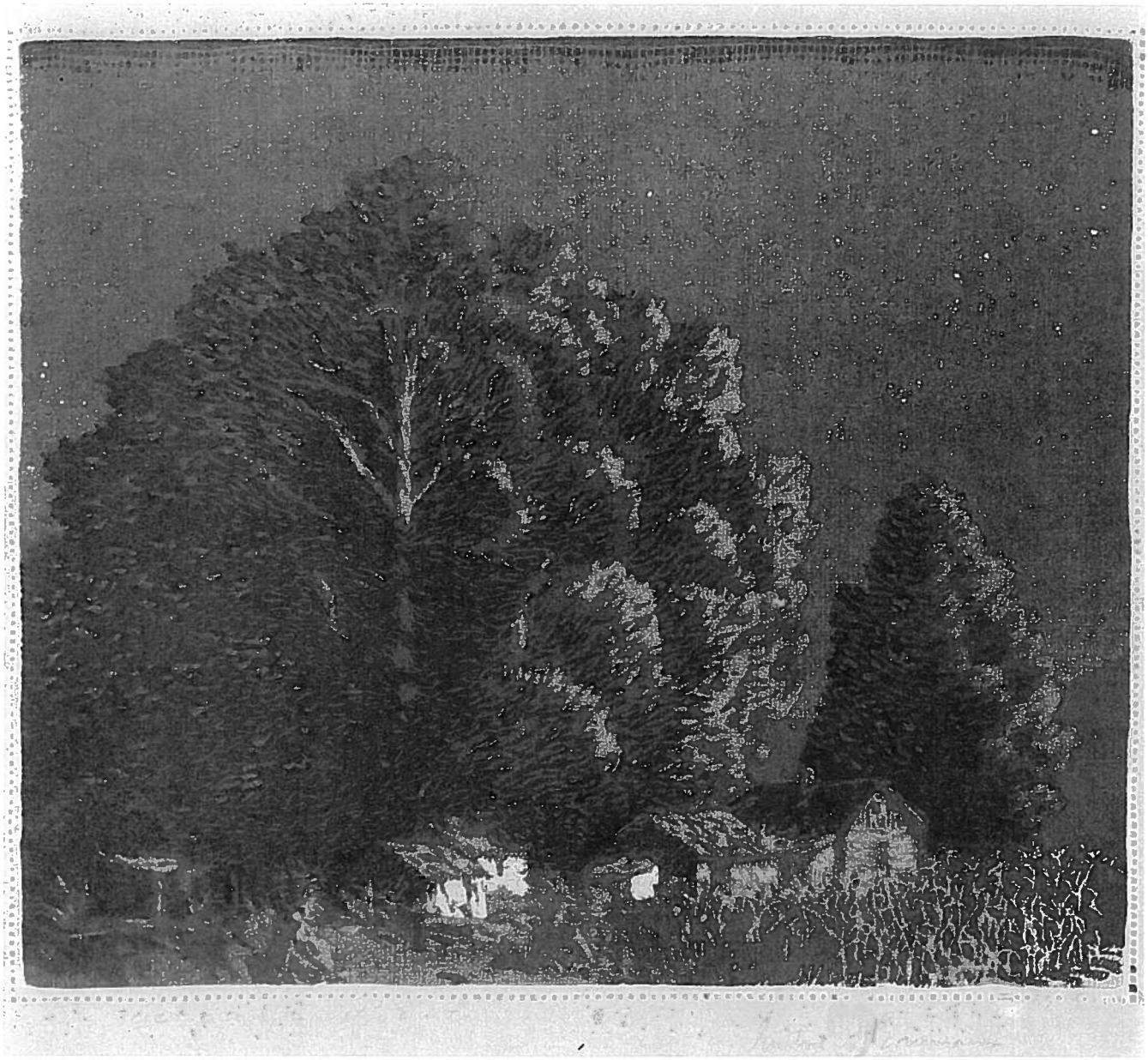
Courtesy Champion International

His early drawings were technical and precise, with structure blocked out in areas of light and dark. This way of seeing was natural to him, and easily lent itself to the requirements of printmaking. His temperament, also, was ideally suited. He loved carving in wood. Immensely patient and meticulous, he thrilled at the challenge of a demanding medium. Although he first worked in oils and had an astonishing array of talents, he threw most of his energy into his woodcuts. "Aside from an adaptability for the woodcut, I thought it a better outlet than painting. There are too damn many painters and not enough artists."

The early prints were monochromatic, with a dark, heavy quality.

Baumann returned to Chicago for a stint at making food labels for the Swift and Armour companies. By 1909 he was ready for a change

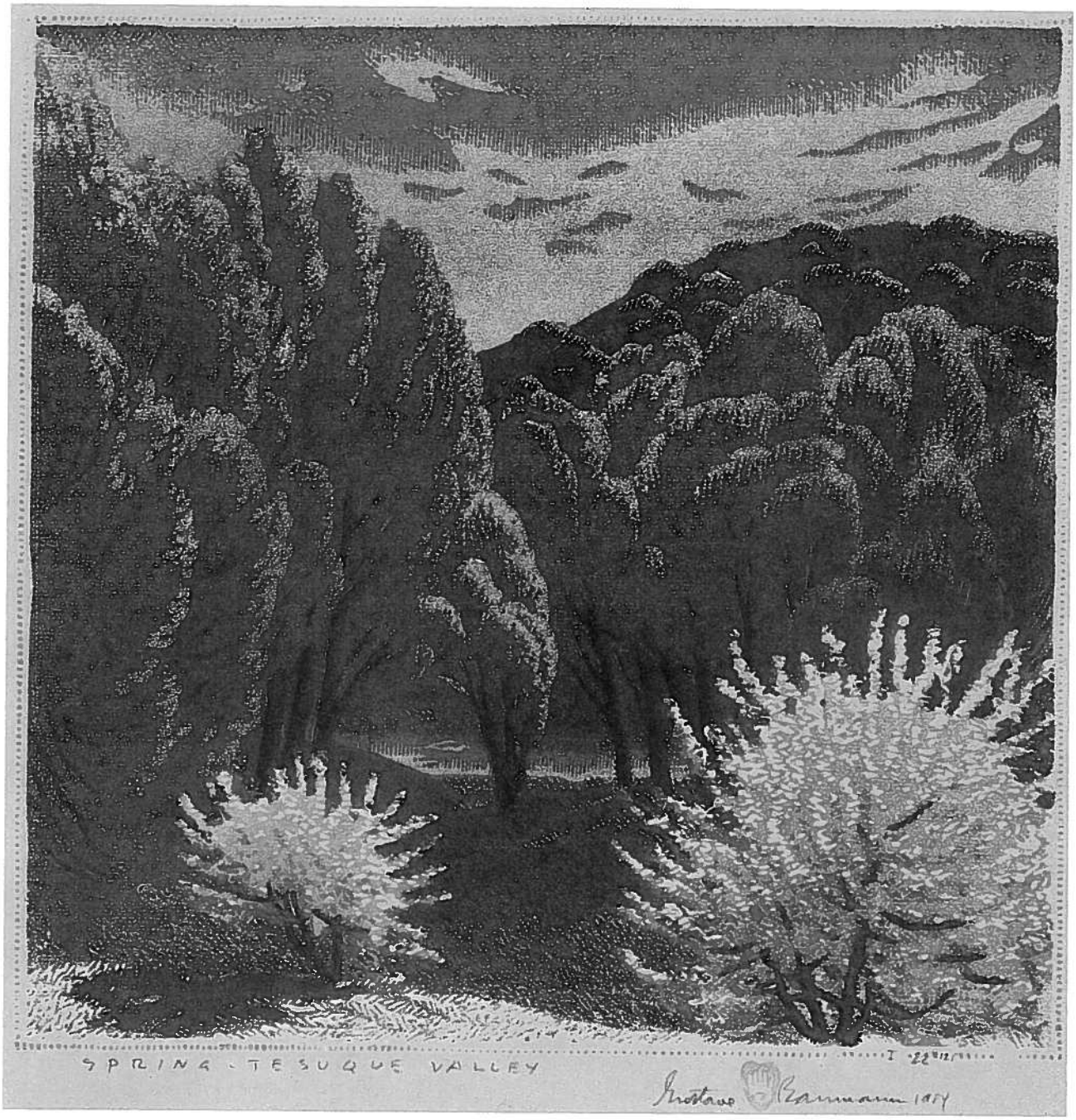
Above: Plum and Peach Bloom, *color woodcut print.*
Right: Untitled, *color woodcut print, 6¾x5¾".*



and settled in rural Brown County, Indiana. He claimed "it had that restful something we all yearn for," and set about capturing it in his art. And truly, there is something safe and comforting about prints like *October Night*. He had a tremendous feeling for place and an uncanny ability to transmit the flavor of it into his work. The Indiana woodcuts are filled with the earthy yet prim essence of the Midwest.

BAUMANN was pioneering on two fronts. He was one of the originators of the illustrational style that we have come to think of as so typically American. It is a style that honors ordinary folk and the farms and towns that they call home. Subdued colors crept into his palette: pale and cool and soft. He was one of the first westerners to fully develop the use of color in woodblock printing, and unlike the

Above: October Night, *color woodcut print, 9x11".*
Left: Untitled, *color woodcut print, 7x5".*

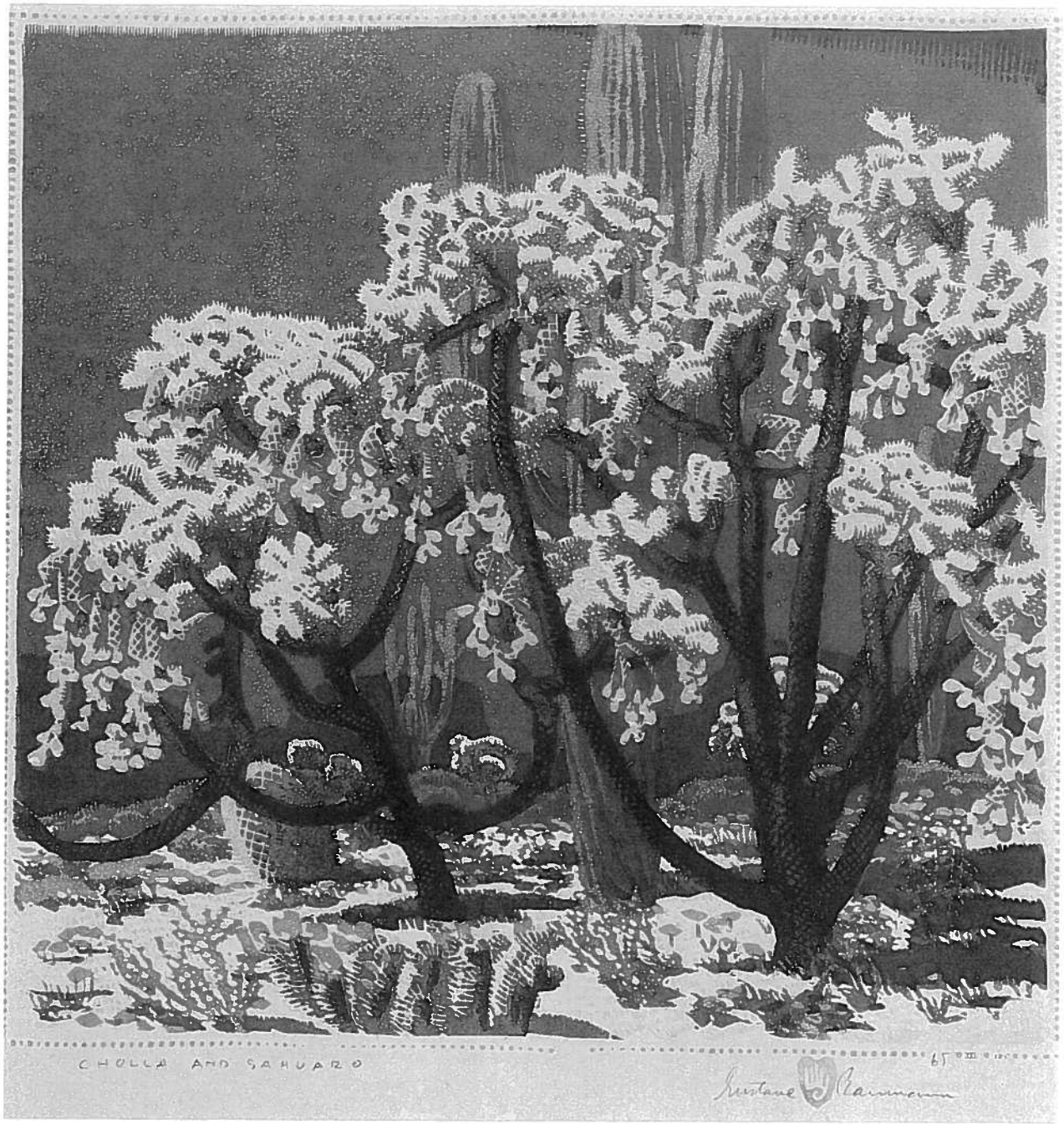


Ukiyo-e artists of Japan, he did all the sketching, carving and printing himself.

After seven years in Indiana, Baumann moved between rural New York, New York City and Provincetown. His restlessness brought him to New Mexico in 1918. Santa Fe took such a hold on his spirit that he made it his home for the rest of his long life.

SOMETHING happened to Baumann when he hit New Mexico. His work tells the story. In Indiana he had begun to use touches of bright color, but his efforts were timid. His shyness dissolved in the purifying New Mexico sunlight. His color went wild. An electrifying explosion of hot golds, magentas and greens spilled in ecstasy, straight from his heart. Gone were the limits and the illustrational style befitting

Above: Spring Tesuque Valley, *color woodcut print 13x12½" (1954).*
Right: Temple of St. Francis *(Santa Fe), color woodcut print, 5½x3½".*



Courtesy Champion International

Indiana. A new spontaneity and painterly quality emerged. His shapes went molten, alive in the shimmering light. Form and detail were created by color alone, as in *Spring Tesuque Valley*, done all in luminous shades of green and purple. He mastered luminosity and with it captured the mystery of the Southwest. Clear light sings in *Cholla and Saguaro*. Its intensity shocks the eye. *Rain in the Mountains*, with its mustard slopes flowing golden beneath a purple sky, is permeated by the shimmering ultraviolet of Baumann's favorite storm light.

Baumann worked from color sketches done in gouache, an opaque watercolor. The gouaches are interesting, both in their own right and as part of the long, painstaking process of completing a color print. The gouaches are done on heavy brown paper and are textured by

Above: Cholla and Sahuaro, *color woodcut print (ca. 1924), 12½x12½".*
Left: Self-portrait, title page to "The Work of Gustave Bauman," color woodcut print.

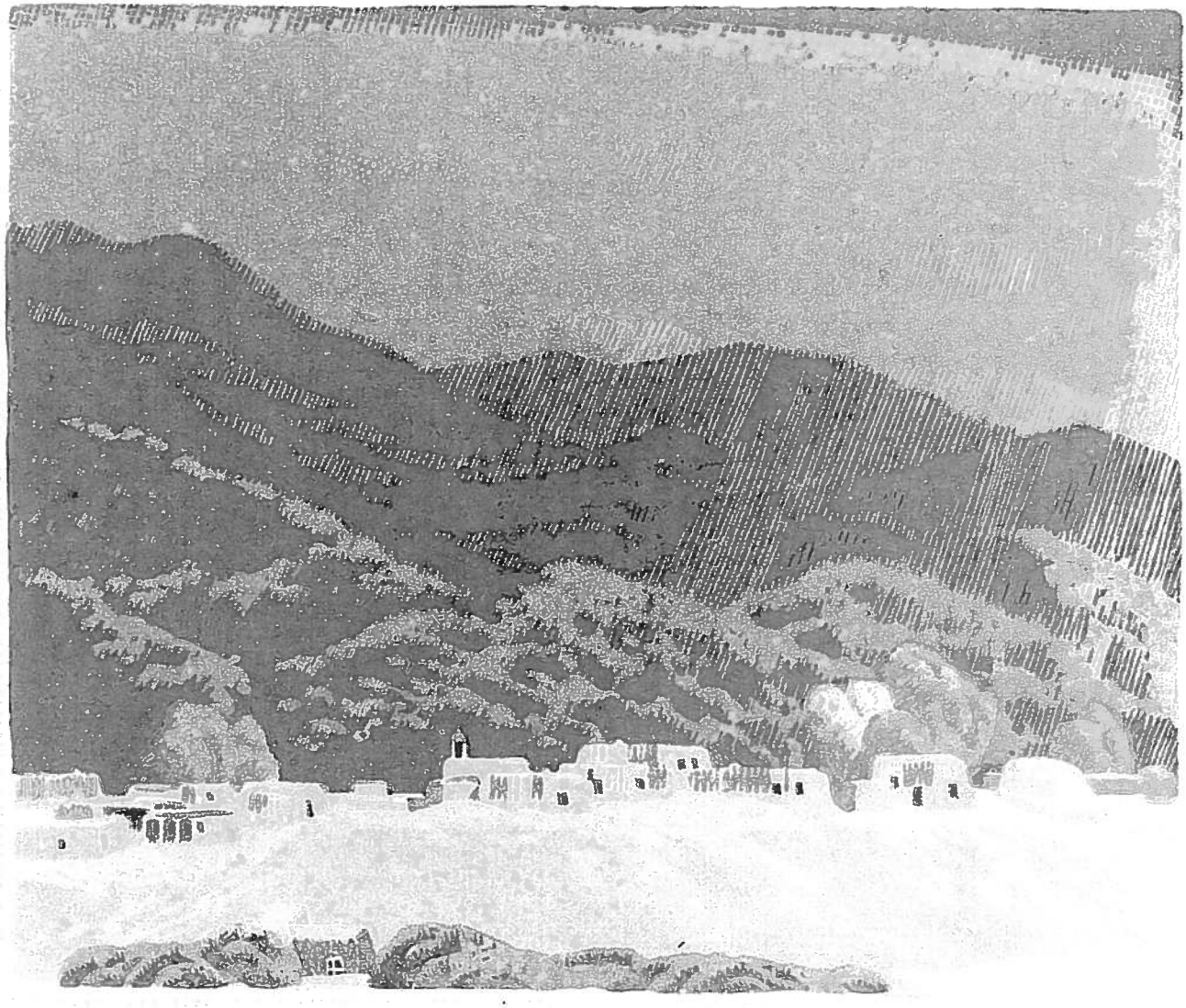
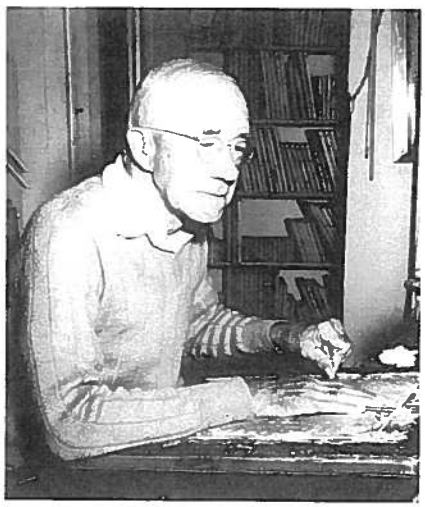


Photo: Art Taylor

pencil sketching. They are the foundation from which Baumann worked. His concern in most of them was with composition and form; what his eye must have seen first. The color appears naturalistic in the beginning, before it is transformed and enriched by his imagination in second gouaches and endless trial proofs. Some of the gouaches are richer and more carefully crafted than others. *Watch by the Gate* is particularly beautiful and finished.

The extraordinary sculptural quality of Baumann's woodcuts begins in the gouache. The forms remain solid in the final print, but by then they are overlaid with translucent color and light. Baumann's talent breathed new joy and new life into scenes as extraordinary as the Grand Canyon or as commonplace as one's backyard. His wonder was inexhaustible, infectious, and ever light-hearted.

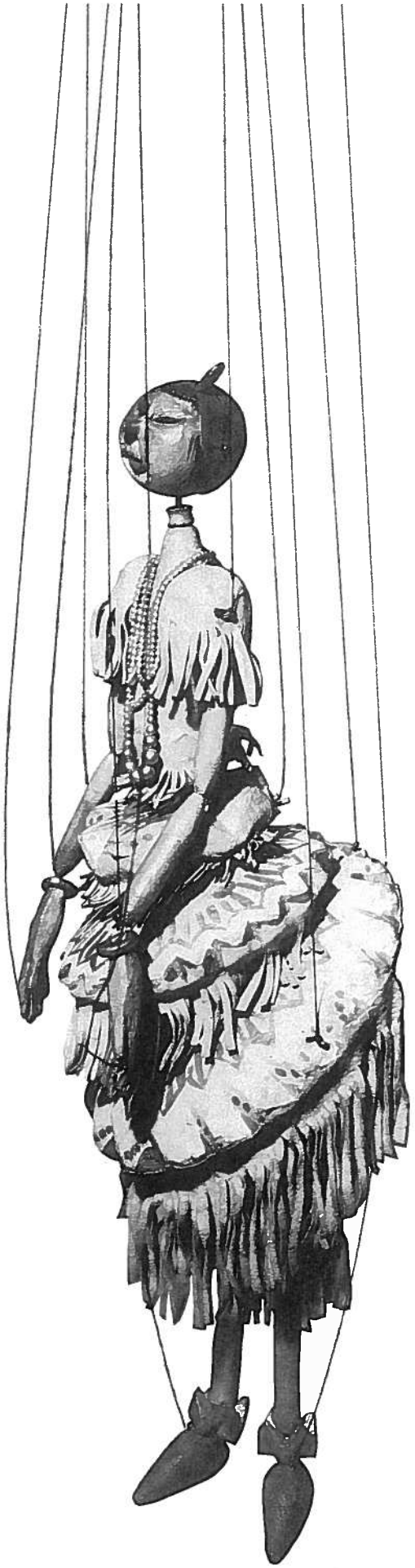


Above: **Rain in the Mountains,** ***color woodcut print, 9x11".***
Right: Baumann at work on a woodcut block.

"ART is its own reward," he once said. "When it ceases to be fun, it is a good idea to find something else that is." Along with this attitude came a special love for folk art, and for dolls and toys in particular. Gustave Baumann scoffed at the distinction between fine art and folk art. His attitudes were far too humorous and down to earth to worry about such ponderous and pedantic judgments. He valued fine handwork and the time spent creating it. "Time was meant to be used and not saved."

In his own art, Baumann took as much care and delight in carving a toy village or a crowd of gnomish marionettes as he did in his "serious" work as a painter and printmaker. He collected Pueblo kachina figures, and when he included them in works such as *Cochiti Ensemble* or *Hopi Kachinas*, they became living characters interacting with one

Above: Hopi Katzinas *(kachinas), color woodcut print (ca. 1924-26), 12x13".*
Left: Untitled, *gouache, 6½x5½".*



another. He made a print called *Night after Christmas* in which nightmare-huge toys loom over a child whose hair is standing on end. The marionettes, too, are alive with that combined sense of humor and horror so integral to the German folk tale.

The marionettes, so expressive of Baumann's spirit of whimsy and delight, will be shown again this June at the Santa Fe Armory for the Arts. They will be part of a retrospective exhibition showing all aspects of Baumann's artistic career. It will include the gouaches, which have not been shown before in Santa Fe. Perhaps best of all, the marionettes may perform again at this Gustave Baumann Centennial show after more than twenty years of retirement.

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Gustave Baumann's "Flapper" marionette.